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Ricky and the Endless Monotony

Fiction • Ben Gamble

“Hey man,” Ricky said. “Stuff like this is pretty beautiful, huh?”

There is no point to any of this, I thought back.

We were floating in Ricky’s above-ground pool, looking up at the stars. The pool had half a dozen holes in it, so he had a few garden hoses pumping water back in where he failed to duct tape the levees back together. He’d somehow engineered equilibrium and we stayed constant in the tepid water. We’d been floating long enough for his backyard to turn from soil to swamp to sludge. I fumbled at the cooler that drifted between us, grabbing another beer. The stars had all turned into shooting stars three cans back.

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I met Ricky at a bar outside of Paris, Tennessee. I had wanted to die in Paris, drinking wine with a handsome man on the Seine.

They have a fake Eiffel tower in Paris, Tennessee. I figured I could get a six-pack and convince one of the locals to get naked with me underneath it. That was probably as close as I was going to get.

I was doing my best to squeeze a few more days into my lifespan before someone put a bullet in my head. I figured if I took enough shots, it would make getting shot a little easier. Hence the bar. Hence Paris, Tennessee. Hence Ricky.

The bar had no chairs. It wasn’t some kind of new trend. It was just a really shitty bar. There was no clear dividing line between the simple smell of dip and where the tobacco had chemically bonded to the oxygen.

“Hey man,” Ricky said, looking at me trying to wobble my center of gravity back over the counter. The no chairs thing was a lot harder to handle now than it had been a few hours ago. Ricky had narrow set brown eyes that looked perpetually confused.

“You new in town?”

I blinked a few times, trying to process Ricky and every stupid thing about those six words. I was not a man. I was wearing a dress I’d bought in the Moscow airport. I had a duffel bag with a Spetsnaz patch ripped off next to my feet.

Ricky had a mullet. There was no duffel bag next to his feet, but he was still carrying a lot of baggage. His brown hair had enough oil to be a member of the Saudi royal family. I moved to face him, my head a few seconds slower on the turn than my eyes. Or maybe my eyes were slower than my head. I nodded my head up and down.

“Had a feelin’,” Ricky said, turning back to his drink. It was October. He was wearing a Carhartt jacket with the elbows worn through and cargo shorts that jingled as he walked. His calves were rock solid, columns of hairy marble that connected bulging pockets to Walmart work boots. “You need a place to stay?” he asked. His eyes widened and his pudgy cheeks reddened a bit. “I don’t mean, like—you know, your being a woman and all, just—just hospitality, seems like—”

My neurons waded through the American piss the bartender had on tap to start firing. Ricky seemed harmless. I was probably going to be sleeping on the bathroom floor otherwise. And there was absolutely no way this man was high profile.

I nodded, and somehow it felt like I slurred that too.



Ricky’s couch was pretty comfortable, all things considered. It was a polyester refuge in the middle of his home. There was a family quilt thrown over the couch that Ricky would explain to me the significance of many times. I got lost every time, mostly because at least three relatives in the quilt’s lineage were named Marlene.

“It ain’t much, but she’s comfy. Here,” he said, disappearing down a hallway. Well, down the hallway. Ricky’s house was a bungalow, one long hallway that had a few rooms jutting off here and there. The house looked like a snake, if God had been drunk when he made the snake. The walls were wood paneling and it all smelled like dust. I staggered and managed to fall onto the couch with some semblance of grace. Ricky came back with a white bedsheet and a camouflage pillow.

Back in Moscow, I could’ve pulled off two hundred sit-ups. Ricky had to help me get my head high enough for the pillow to slip under.

“I’ll leave your bag here,” Ricky said, putting my duffel next to the couch. It clinked. Not like, spare change in Ricky’s pockets clink. Like, assault rifle clink. Ricky didn’t notice. “Hey, man, you sleep good.”

I'm not a man. I tried to say with my face. *I don't sleep anymore, anyways.*

That was the first night I passed out on Ricky's couch.

Most mornings I woke up the same way. My brain was working through the tail end of a dream. Always the same sorts of places. A bombed out house in Chechnya, the smell of gunpowder and salt and iron. A rooftop in Ukraine, elbows screaming from lying prone for so long. Arms burning out one more pull-up as my fingers froze to a steel bar in Siberia. Then I'd hear some mechanical racket and sit up as fast as I could.

The racket was the Stairmaster. It was always the fucking Stairmaster.

Ricky had no job and no foreseeable need to attain one. But he had a Stairmaster. Every morning at sunrise Ricky dragged himself to the base of his machine, whirred it to life, and huffed himself up Everest and back down without ever moving a foot. Occasionally he'd be listening to motivational speeches or audiotapes while he did it. Mostly, it was Lynyrd Skynyrd. I usually threw up in the bathroom while this went on, admiring my scars in the toilet water reflection before I parted ways with my stomach lining.

Ricky's living room consisted of a couch, a Stairmaster, an easy chair, and a TV. The TV was clearly mounted by Ricky, alone. He obviously hadn't sprung for a studfinder, so the wall looked like the ones we used to line people in front of back in Kiev. The TV was probably ninety inches wide. It was the most expensive thing in the home. Well, maybe the Stairmaster cost more – I don't know how much Stairmasters cost. The point is if you tried to rob Ricky there was nothing of value you could physically get out of the house unless you had calves like his.

After his workout Ricky would get a glass of ice water ("Aw, shoot," he'd say, standing back up, "Let me grab you one.") and come sit back down, sweat contouring his mullet around his lumpy head.

"Hey, man, where you from?" he asked the first time.

I wondered what the sign language for Russia was. Then I remembered there was no way in hell Ricky would know sign language. I pointed at my throat.

Ricky nodded knowingly.

You idiot. I pointed at my throat and shook my head *no*.

"Oh, I gotcha. You're deaf?"

Jesus Christ.

•••

"Hey, man," Ricky asked one day. "You need anything?"

I raised an eyebrow. Ricky and I had learned how to converse with each other like that. He got used to my body language and I got used to the five second delay of turning Tennessee drawl into something resembling the

English I'd learned in a classroom.

Ricky was a gentleman. He paid for everything, which would've been more generous if he wasn't loaded.

"I won the lottery a while back," Ricky told me a few days into my Tennessee residency. "I chose the payout-every-month option, you know, for a lot of reasons. One, ain't nobody needs that much money at once, you know? I'd probably just spend it on something stupid. And two..." Ricky's eyes narrowed, and his hand absently fell to the other one, rubbing at a tan line on a stubby ring finger.

Alimony. The true killer in this house.

I nodded. Usually Ricky would talk and talk, which was fine with me.

"Anyways, I try to live the same lifestyle, more or less," he said, opening up a Natty Light. "I don't think too highly of those people who, you know, win the lottery and forget all about their friends and family."

I've been here two weeks and only the mailman has come by to visit you.

"Can't forget who you are, man," Ricky said as he leaned back the recliner, his gut pouring over his belt like a beer-belly Buddha. He stared at the TV, his face lit with the blue screen glow, looking everywhere and nowhere, at one with the quilt and the chair and the Stairmaster all at once.

Tell me about it, I said, fumbling for another Natty. The tab was easy to open even when you were piss drunk. This country does a few things well.

•••

I think a lot of women would've been uncomfortable going home with a guy alone from a bar. I wasn't, mostly because killing Ricky in no way posed a problem to me, morally or practically, but also because he was pretty shy around women. Or maybe he was just shy around me. I didn't really have a broad pool of data to draw from, here.

I was in the bathtub – which still smelled like homemade moonshine (or maybe that's me), sitting up far enough that I could clean my pistol without getting it wet. I also had some bubbles in the bath. It was one of the few things I asked Ricky to spring for. I liked lavender.

It's not really standard to clean a pistol in a bubble bath, but I didn't care. I figured if I had to use it again, I'd just be using it on myself. I don't think they'll come looking. Nobody defects to places like this.

Ricky knocked on the door. "Hey, man," he said. "You, uh, got feminine complications in there?"

It took about a minute of silence on the other side of the door for Ricky to remember I was mute. "Oh, shoot," he muttered. "Um, okay. Hope it's okay in there. If you uh, need anything."

There was silence, like a subsonic round, or like a bad date. Or, you know.

I sunk lower in the bubble bath and reached for the beer next to me.

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“Dang, man,” Ricky said, pulling off his trucker’s hat and scratching at his mullet. “You’re a good shot. Just like Annie Oakley. Or that dude in them Jason Bourne movies.” He chewed on his cheek. The snow was falling around us, sticking to the wet ground in muddy clumps. Ricky had gotten a thirteen foot tall Christmas tree (“Shoot, man, it’s my favorite time of year!”) and strung up half his house with lights before running out. He was always going to run up to Home Depot and get the rest the next day.

You should see me shoot sober, I thought. I can hit a journalist from half a mile away. I handed Ricky back his rifle, an old lever-action .22 his grandfather had given him. .22. The Mossad used .22. Pussies.

Ricky walked over to the fence, his work boots crunching in the snow. The hair on his calves was standing up on end as the wind tugged at his cargo shorts. He pulled his heavy winter coat tighter and stacked up all the cans back up.

“Dang, man,” he said. Ricky thought it was tasteless to curse in front of a woman. “I never seen a lady shoot that good. Better than me, easy.” He chuckled, but the laughter trailed off. “My wife never liked guns.”

Ricky stared out across the snow, only his right side lit up from the half-assed Christmas lights he’d strung up. His mustache quivered for a moment as he opened his mouth a few times, starting to talk and stopping.

I nodded. That was all you did when Ricky said something about his wife. I mean, fuck it, I’m mute, that’s all I did anyways. I sipped at one of Ricky’s beers before putting it back down in the snow to stay cold.

“Alright, my turn,” Ricky said, taking a full minute to reload the rifle.

•••

Every few weeks Ricky would develop a new passion and he would devote himself entirely to it for seventy-two hours or so. Usually I could tell by what the audiobook he was listening to on the Stairmaster each morning was, or what channel he had on at night. That night it was politics.

We sipped at the beers. Ricky was on his first. I was on...well, I was drinking.

“These politicians, man,” Ricky said, shaking his head. It made his mullet sway with patriotic indignation. We were watching C-SPAN. I recognized a few Senators. They’d visited us in Moscow. “Nobody cares about the American people anymore.”

I wondered if Ricky could name the Secretary of State. To be fair, I only could because they’d priced out a hit on him a while back. But that was still something. I waved my hand at Ricky to grab his attention.

“Huh?” Ricky asked, taking his cap off and wiping his brow. Ricky could break a sweat sitting still, in February. “Jeopardy?”

I nodded. Jeopardy was good.

“Yeah, let’s do Jeopardy. I bet I’ll beat you tonight.” he said. “I’m just playing,” he added almost immediately, glancing to make sure I wasn’t offended.

I never buzz in, you beautiful idiot.

“It’s good having you around, man,” Ricky said. “I get lonely sometimes.” I leaned over and clinked my can against his. Ricky smiled.

•••

Ricky got off the Stairmaster one morning. He looked down at his calves. He did a few tentative leg raises.

“Sharon always liked my calves,” he said. “You know that used to be a sign of fertility back in the day? For like, kings and stuff?”

Your country never had a king, I wanted to tell him. You people would talk less if you did.

Instead royal Ricky went and got some new cargo shorts.

•••

It was September. “Now, listen,” Ricky said, as he tied a tie around his collar. It took him several attempts. Well, that’s redundant. I never saw Ricky do anything but that Stairmaster in one attempt. He fumbled into his suit jacket and attempted to situate it as well as a jacket two sizes too small could be. He squeezed into midnight black cargo shorts. “I know, you know, you’re not from here, but, I think this is an important day for all people, man.”

I nodded.

“You have any dress clothes?”

I have three fake passports and a rifle that breaks down and fits in a briefcase. Instead I shook my head.

“Huh,” Ricky said. “I don’t reckon I have any of Sharon’s. It…it wouldn’t be right anyways.”

I think the only way Sharon’s clothes would fit me would be if I ate Sharon.

Ricky led me outside and loaded the shells into his shotgun. Ricky was proud of his shotgun. He told me about how his great-grandfather used it in World War II. I’m sure he got to fire it at least once between you all showing up and us winning the war. We stood next to the pool, which had deflated since Ricky turned the water off. We slowly sunk into the mud the longer we stood. Ricky’s lawn had long since died as a result of being the flood banks of his aboveground pool and being buried under a few inches of pine needles. A ceramic deer stood at the edge of the woods, leaning against one of the trees with a missing front leg.

“For all those who died in the Twin Towers, and in the Pentagon, and all our veterans who perished fighting terror overseas.” He turned to me.

I raised a Natty. *To everyone who ever knew too much.*

Ricky raised the shotgun and fired both barrels. There was a thunder blast and a dull thud. A moment later a bald eagle dropped from the sky.

We both stared. It was a bloody mess. White and black feathers floated down around us like snow.

We stared.

“Oh...oh my God,” Ricky said, the shotgun dropping from his hands. It squelched in the mud. The bald eagle fumbled, trying to flap its one functioning wing. Its eyes bulged and rolled around, looking for something, a branch, a nest, maybe God. Instead it saw Ricky. I didn’t feel sorry for it until that moment.

I sipped at the Natty. Ricky knelt, covering its eyes with his red hat. “This...this is the worst day of my life. Oh my God. That was...I didn’t mean to...” He looked up at me with wide eyes.

I was sent to Ricky’s shed to get shovels as he attempted to ease the eagle’s passing. It took a long time to die, kicking up bloody feathers each time Ricky tried to hold it tighter, clawing the hell out of his suit. I came back, leaning on the shovel for support. Ricky finally stood, putting his hat back on. There were gouges across the too-tight dress shirt, mud and blood and beer across his dress pants, if we’re calling them that.

We spent a few hours digging out a grave. An eagle doesn’t need that big of a grave, but I didn’t bother telling Ricky. We carved out what could’ve served as a bird mausoleum. Every human rights activists I’d ever iced could’ve fit in that damn bird’s grave. Weeks of keeping his aboveground pool full had caused the kind of erosion in his backyard that usually takes tidal waves to accomplish. Ricky and I slid further down with each shovelful, the ground crumbling and melting away. Ricky tried in vain to keep the mud from seeping down and covering the eagle.

Getting out was a bitch. For Ricky. Not for me. I crouched and jumped up, landing with good form, bounce in my knees, all that. My old coach would be proud. I bet I could still do a back handspring if I had to. Not that I cared to, in front of Ricky.

“Dang, man,” Ricky said, his mourner’s solemnity broken for a moment. “You a dancer or something?” He paled. “Like a, like a ballet dancer, or something, not like an exotic performer. I mean, not assuming you’re doing ballet because you’re Russian, it could be any kind, really.”

Gymnast. I helped Ricky up and out of the mud pit we’d made. Ricky looked down at the bird and gathered his composure for a moment, the hoses

of the pool gurgling behind us, the cicadas chirping ahead of us. Both of us had sweated through our clothes, because apparently September is still summer here.

“You may be dead,” Ricky said, tears welling in his eyes. “But America lives on.”

He saluted, his hand shaking as he closed his eyes and fought back tears. I saluted too. The bird went out like a bitch, but I guess we all want someone to salute us when we die.

Ricky started to sing the national anthem, his drawl warbling and shaky. I went and got another Natty.

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We were floating in Ricky’s aboveground pool, looking up at the stars. When the garden hoses were gurgling at full strength, it was hard to hear Ricky sometimes. I saw a satellite blinking over Tennessee as it drifted. I wondered if it was one of ours or one of theirs. Whenever I’d start to float away from Ricky I’d hit the edge of the pool and float back.

“Hey, man,” Ricky said. “Stuff like this is pretty beautiful, isn’t it?”